

Biosecurity breaches are a significant risk to SA's agricultural growth agenda

- One aspect that remains a major challenge for the domestic animal farming sector and has been raised by our members in various engagements for some time is the weaknesses in South Africa's biosecurity system. Admittedly, biosecurity breaches are not uniquely South African and have become a significant challenge globally. We frequently hear of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in cattle, African Swine Fever in pigs and Avian Influenza in poultry worldwide. However, very few countries have had to deal with the scale of these disease outbreaks almost simultaneously as South Africa has had to do.
- In 2022, six of our nine provinces reported MFD outbreaks. The conditions haven't changed much. In fact, on November 4 this year, the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD) announced "a suspicion of an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) in cattle in Ramatlabama under the Ngaka Modiri Molema District Municipality in North West Province." The DALRRD added, "At this point, it is just a suspicion of an outbreak based on positive serology results. Epidemiological investigations are underway to confirm the presence or absence of virus circulation." This means that the FMD issue that was identified a year ago remains a challenge. Notably, these outbreaks weigh heavily on the cattle industry's fortunes, and the 2022 massive outbreak led to the suspension of beef and livestock product exports to a range of markets for some time.
- The impact was not limited to cattle as the sheep industry was also affected. We saw the suspension of wool exports for a couple of months in China, a significant export market. At the time, China had cited the FMD disease outbreak as a reason to suspend South Africa's wool imports. But as we have highlighted before, China may have also had capacity issues at its ports at the time because of the tail-end effects of COVID-19 and the restrictions that lasted longer than in parts of the world. We say this because there is a unique protocol to handle the wool shipments and avoid any containment during an FMD disease outbreak in South Africa. South Africa and China agreed on this protocol following the 2019 outbreak, which weighed on wool exports that year, resulting in a major financial impact on the wool industry and farmers.
- Towards the end of 2022, we learned of the outbreaks of the African Swine Fever, which put the pig industry under additional pressure. This remains an ongoing challenge in the pig industry. Most recently, the focus has been on Avian Influenza, where more than a hundred commercial poultry facilities have reported cases. There are major losses in parent stock for breeders of layers and broilers, thus leading to imports of fertilized eggs to rebuild the parent stock flock decimated by the disease. The financial impact of this outbreak is evident in the recent losses announced by the major producers and the price increases of some products from a consumer perspective.

- The outbreaks that started a year ago, and even the recent Avian Influenza, occurred at a time when the livestock and poultry industry also faced higher feed prices – maize and soybeans – thus worsening the farmers' financial fortunes. It is only from the second quarter of this year that feed prices materially declined from the levels we saw over the last two years.
- Notably, any negative impact on the livestock and poultry industry risks presenting a material impact on the fortunes of South Africa's agriculture. This subsector accounts for roughly half of agriculture's gross value added. Also worth noting is that improving the biosecurity measures could boost a sub-sector that is crucial for inclusive growth. For example, the National Agricultural Marketing Council (NAMC) estimates suggest that black farmers account for 18%, 13% and 34% of wool, mohair, and cattle production, respectively. So, these farmers and their business's growth prospects remain at risk if there are no material improvements in biosecurity. This also means the trading of their livestock faces various constraints. One could argue that, in some instances, these new entrant farmers may even have fewer protective measures such as the ability to manage livestock movement with proper fencing.
- In essence, South Africa's biosecurity breaches, as seen in the recent outbreaks, signal some serious capacity challenges in farm biosecurity measures and the country's veterinary and related support services, mainly the laboratories, control the movement of livestock and vaccine production. Therefore, the South African government and organized agriculture and industry bodies should closely work together to address the country's biosecurity challenges.
- As we previously stated, as climate change intensifies, the problem of animal diseases will likely be more prevalent. Thus, the DALRRD should consider earmarking a share of its annual budget for emergencies to deal with biosecurity risks. These funds should be utilized under strict rules and in concurrence with the National Treasury only in the case of notifiable animal disease outbreaks. This will be necessary to control animal movements, procure vaccines and permit vaccination in certain areas, employ additional staff at the provincial level, and compensate producers a certain share when animals must be culled.
- Also necessary is the repair and maintenance of international fences, which fail to keep wild animals and infected animals from neighbouring countries out of South Africa. Collaboration between Public Works and the National Treasury in this respect is critical. In essence, most interventions require better management, coordination, restructuring of the various departments, and investment in fencing, new laboratory equipment, and vaccine production.
- Beyond the technical matters, the relationship between the regulators and farmers should also be improved so that disease outbreaks can be managed collaboratively with no hostility between regulators and the farmers. We would like to emphasize that most of the interventions required to deal with these Biosecurity Breaches are listed in the Biosecurity Task Team report presented to the DALRRD about two years ago. A full implementation of the Task Team report would be positive for the sector.